

Early Recognition and Treatment is the Key to Control

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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What is scabies?

Scabies is a fairly common infectious disease of the skin caused by a mite (which is a tiny insect-like bug, so small that it can be seen only with a microscope). Scabies mites burrow under the skin, eventually causing severe itching and producing pimple-like irritations.

Who gets scabies?

Scabies infestations can affect people from all socioeconomic levels without regard to age, sex, race or standards of personal hygiene. Clusters of cases, or outbreaks, are occasionally seen in nursing homes, institutions and child care centers.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies mites are transferred by direct skin-to-skin contact. Indirect transfer from underwear or bedclothes can occur only if these have been contaminated by infested people immediately beforehand. Scabies can also be transmitted during sexual contact.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

Symptoms include one or several areas of rash accompanied by intense itching, particularly at night. The areas of the skin most affected by scabies include the webs and sides of the fingers, around the wrists, elbows and armpits, waist, thighs, genitalia, nipples, breasts and lower buttocks.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear from two to six weeks in people who have not previously been exposed to scabies infestations. People who have had a previous bout with scabies mites may show symptoms within one to four days after subsequent re-exposures.

When and for how long is a person able to spread scabies?

A person infested with scabies is infective to others through skin-to-skin contact as long as the person remains untreated. A person who has been treated is non-infectious to others on the day after treatment. Children can return to daycare or school on the day after treatment.

What is the treatment for scabies?

Medicated skin lotions or creams containing permethrin, lindane, or crotamiton are available through a physician's prescription for the treatment of scabies. Follow your physician's instructions for applying the lotion or cream to your body. Laundering clothing and bed linen used by the infected person in the 48 hours prior to treatment, using hot cycles of both washer and dryer, has been recommended.

Sometimes, itching may persist for 1-2 weeks, and during this period, should not be regarded as treatment failure or re-infestation. In about 5% of cases, a second course of treatment may be necessary seven to 10 days later. Treatment is recommended for household and sexual contacts of an infested person who have had skin-to-skin contact with the person.

What can be done to prevent the spread of scabies?

Prompt diagnosis and treatment of scabies is the key. If cases of scabies have been identified in a daycare, school, housing complex, any suspect itchy rashes should receive prompt medical attention. Avoid skin-to-skin contact and sharing of clothing or bed linen with untreated, infested individuals. Health education on mode of transmission and on the need for early diagnosis and treatment is important.

For more information on this topic:

Information about scabies and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.